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SUBJECT: THE DAY AFTER: MEETINGS WITH THE CANDIDATES

Classified By: Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: The day after President Karzai accepted the decision which will lead to a second round in Afghanistan's presidential elections, Ambassador Eikenberry met separately with Karzai and with Dr. Abdullah Abdullah to reaffirm full U.S. support for a successful second round scheduled for November 7. He emphasized that the U.S. and international community would not engage in efforts to form a coalition government; any such decision needs to be made by the candidates. Karzai recommended that the Embassy continue to engage Afghan media and when doing so, to commend Karzai's decision to accept a second round as a step towards strengthening the democratic process and emphasize the U.S.'s long-term commitment to Afghanistan. He agreed that a proposed U.S. troop increase would need to be seen as a joint Afghan-U.S. decision, and the announcement of such an increase must address concerns in Afghanistan, the region, and NATO countries.

¶2. (S) Abdullah told Ambassador Eikenberry that his main concern was that Afghanistan have a foundation for a real election process. He recounted his recent conversation with Karzai in which they discussed the importance of national unity and agreed to get together for talks. We encouraged him to work with reformers in Karzai's cabinet on a unified platform of ideas for the good of the country. Abdullah pledged to continue to call for calm and to encourage Afghans to vote in the second round, but expressed concern that some key Karzai relatives are willing to engage in "anything necessary" to advance Karzai's fortunes. End Summary.

KARZAI CONFIDENT, POSITIVE

¶3. (S) Ambassador Eikenberry met with President Karzai on October 21 to clarify the U.S. position on a second round of elections. National Security Advisor Zalmay Rassoul also joined the 45-minute meeting. A tired yet confident Karzai began by expressing his appreciation for President Obama's call and the "extremely positive" conversation. Ambassador Eikenberry then outlined four major points regarding the second round: the U.S., NATO, and international community's commitment to ensuring a successful election; U.S. neutrality regarding discussions of a coalition government; the fact that the only authoritative voice on U.S. policy in Afghanistan comes from the U.S. Embassy; and an offer of Embassy public support for any elements of the proposed compact between the new government and the Afghan people that has been discussed with Karzai and his team over the past three months.

¶4. (S) Ambassador Eikenberry elaborated on the third point and suggested that, while "private citizens" may try to help in days to come, "the U.S. Embassy is the only official voice of U.S. policy in Kabul." Karzai responded with his trademark "I got it." Ambassador Eikenberry used French FM Kouchner's recent paper on a proposed CEO-like position, which implied Abdullah Abdullah as the preferred candidate, as an example of an independent voice which is not conveying

the intentions of the whole international community. Karzai said it was "good news" when Ambassador Eikenberry told him Kouchner's idea was neither endorsed nor rejected by the United States.

¶5. (S) Ambassador Eikenberry encouraged Karzai and his team to discuss aspects of the "compact" publicly. Karzai took note when Ambassador Eikenberry promised that the Embassy would find ways to comment positively on Karzai's presentation of dimensions of the compact.

¶6. (S) President Karzai noted Secretary of State Clinton's upcoming trip to Pakistan, and suggested it might be helpful for the Secretary to visit Afghanistan at that time. Ambassador Eikenberry responded that a visit would only be possible to consider if the second round process was moving forward or if the candidates had made some other sort of agreement by that point.

¶7. (S) President Karzai encouraged the Embassy to continue to seek exposure to the Afghan media and outlined four messages he would like the Embassy to convey: accepting a second round was a good decision by the President of Afghanistan; this decision strengthens the democratic process; the United States will remain committed to Afghanistan; and Afghan people have shown great courage in participating in the election. Karzai also recommended we continue to convey our support for a second round rather than for a coalition government.

¶8. (S) When the conversation turned to the U.S. debate over our military strategy in Afghanistan, Ambassador Eikenberry

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stressed that a decision to send more troops would need to be seen as a collaborative decision. Ambassador Eikenberry described the importance of three different audiences when discussing a troop increase: the Afghan domestic audience, the regional audience, and the U.S./NATO publics. Eikenberry noted Karzai's message to his people should be that U.S. troops are providing for their protection so that governance and justice, and economic development can be advanced; his message to the region should be that the troops are deploying at the invitation of the Afghan people; and his message to the U.S. should be that he is committed as Commander in Chief to pushing his Army and Police so that they will rapidly develop the capabilities necessary to relieve international military forces of front-line combat duties. Karzai agreed to this approach, noting that troops coming in without this kind of political context would not be well received, especially by his people or within the region.

ABDULLAH POSITIVE BUT SKEPTICAL

¶9. (S) At their meeting October 21, Ambassador Eikenberry thanked Dr. Abdullah for his measured approach to the entire campaign and post-election process. He noted that Abdullah had made a huge contribution to the future of Afghanistan and the strengthening of its institutions as well as to his own legacy. Ambassador Eikenberry told Abdullah that the U.S. is fully committed to a second round, noting that if the Afghan players decide it is in their mutual interests to come to some agreement and not to proceed to a second round that is up to them. The U.S. does not object, he said, but we plan to deliver a second round unless both candidates reach an understanding before November 7.

¶10. (S) As he had with Karzai, Ambassador Eikenberry reviewed the challenges facing a second round: 1) the role of the military and the provision of security; 2) logistics; 3) improving the performance of the IEC and ECC. Ambassador Eikenberry told Abdullah that there was a UNAMA meeting earlier that day, at which the assembled Ambassadors had given UNSRSG Kai Eide their full support. Ambassador

Eikenberry said that the number one imperative is to deliver a transparent election. He also emphasized that the U.S. will stay out of political negotiations until if and when its assistance is sought. Ambassador Eikenberry assured Dr. Abdullah that we are prepared to offer necessary support to make the second round happen.

¶11. (S) Eikenberry said that ensuring IEC and ECC cooperation and credibility may be our biggest challenge. He assured Abdullah that we planned to work very closely with UNAMA on this round. Ambassador Eikenberry described that an election where the process emerged intact and the rules were not broken would be a "win" for Afghanistan. Abdullah responded that it was only the transparency of U.S. interactions with him and our obvious commitment to the process that had allowed him to convince his more cynical colleagues that we had no hidden agenda. He said that his main concern too was that Afghanistan have a foundation for a real election process someday. Ambassador Eikenberry reminded Abdullah of how much the United States has invested in Afghanistan in defending the elections process and told him, "what you do not want to do is attack the process. Work with the international bodies and with the IEC." He warned Abdullah that otherwise, he would be destroying the hard work of many and condemning his own standing. Ambassador Eikenberry told Abdullah he had heard his comments on the ECC and IEC earlier in the day and found them "measured and responsible." (Note:

The Embassy called Abdullah before his conference upon hearing his plans to harshly criticize the IEC. This intervention likely contributed to Abdullah's modified tone.)

¶12. (S) Abdullah shared his impressions of President Karzai's October 20 press conference and said that he believes Karzai is fully prepared for a second round. He said he wished Karzai well during their phone call following the press conference and told him "this chapter is now behind us. We have gone through some difficult exercises. Countries that never go through exercises like these are not interesting. Let us put this behind us and look to the interests of the country." Karzai responded in kind regarding the importance of national unity and they agreed to get together at some point. Abdullah said that he was concerned that Karzai is under intense pressure from his inner circle saying that Karzai even sounded pressured while on the phone, as though his inner circle was watching him closely as he spoke. Abdullah said that it was this problem and the likelihood that Karzai feels personally attacked by the political contest he has endured that may keep him from letting bygones be bygones and making any kind of deal.

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¶13. (S) Abdullah said that he does not plan any large rallies before the run-off but that there may perhaps be some rallies in the provinces. He intends to use the media and local shuras to get his message out and to put team members throughout the country for the next two weeks to keep him informed and connected. He sees "new opportunities in the South and the East" as people there now see change is possible. He also said that his main focus will be on monitoring and correcting mistakes in Kandahar, Kabul, and Jalalabad. Abdullah also plans to reach out to other Presidential candidates who lost to see if they will endorse him and direct their voters his way.

¶14. (S) Ambassador Eikenberry told Abdullah, as he told Karzai, that if he discussed dimensions of the "compact" as part of his campaign platform, the Embassy would lend its public support. Ambassador Eikenberry suggested the compact could serve as a basis for discussion with Karzai's team, but also pointed out that the document was not complete. Certain details such as devolution of power and constitutional change need to be addressed by Afghans. Abdullah agreed that the compact would form a good platform for discussions with Karzai, and thanked Ambassador

Eikenberry for his offer of Embassy support for presenting aspects of the compact to the public. Ambassador Eikenberry stressed the importance of this kind of roadmap for protecting the interests of the Afghan nation.

¶15. (S) Ambassador Eikenberry told Abdullah that several members of Karzai's team had emerged as "big idea people" over the last several weeks. He listed Minister of Finance Zakhilwal, IDLG Director Popal, and National Security Advisor Rassoul as influential "reformers" in Karzai's inner circle who appear much more willing than we realized to speak with Karzai about political ideas. Abdullah advisor Farid Zikria, who attended the meeting, noted that he was related to Zakhilwal and offered to reach out to him. Abdullah thanked Ambassador Eikenberry for his insights. He said he had not been aware of these reformers, and asked his advisors to reach out to Zalmay Rassoul as well.

¶16. (S) Abdullah said he would continue to call for calm and for people to come out and vote. He expressed serious concern about the influence of Karzai's brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, head of the Kandahar Provincial Council, and Arif Noorzai, another Karzai relative who works on community security efforts. Both have well-known reputations as narco-traffickers willing to engage in anything necessary to advance Hamid Karzai's fortunes. Abdullah said he was worried Noorzai would use his community security connections to increase tribal divisions in advance of the elections.

¶17. (S) Comment: The Embassy will move forward with the international community and NATO/ISAF to rigorously support preparations for the second round. The Embassy will be active in the Afghan media and work with key Afghan interlocutors to convey our message of commitment to a second round, and to say there will be no attempt by the international community to broker a coalition government. The Embassy will continue to emphasize the United States, long-term commitment to Afghanistan, and publicly praise Karzai's decision. While it was a difficult decision, it is a &win8 for the development of Afghan democracy. The Embassy will praise the courage of Afghan voters in the first round, and encourage Afghans to support, under what will be difficult conditions, the second round. The Embassy will also reinforce points made by candidates which are aligned with the "compact."

¶18. (S) In the days ahead, the Embassy will work to maintain discipline in its messaging and will be watchful for the moment, should it arise, in which we might shift to a proactive engagement with candidates to bring them both together. It is our belief that in the immediate future it is only through convincing efforts to deliver a second round that the necessary political context will be created that could, in turn, lead to serious dialogue between the Karzai and Abdullah camps. End Comment.

EIKENBERRY